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# Higher Education in the 21st Century: Global Challenge and National Response

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## **Latin America: NATIONAL RESPONSES TO WORLD CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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"Globalization," the buzzword of the third millennium, is nothing new for Latin American universities. The first academic institutions in the region were established in the 16th century by the Catholic Church. The national states created after the independence movements of the early 19th century tried to copy the then modern, technically oriented French educational institutions. In recent decades, American research universities and graduate schools became the model to follow. Today, however, the old pattern of adoption and copy of foreign models has become just a small part of a much broader trend of international integration, which has as one of its consequences a series of features, problems, and concerns that affect most higher educational systems in similar ways, while eliciting different and often contradictory responses.

### **Mass Higher Education**

In Latin America as elsewhere, mass higher education developed in the 1960s and in later years not as purposeful projects of governments and university administrators, but as a consequence of large-scale social, economic, and cultural changes beyond anyone's control.<sup>1</sup> In different ways in different countries, a combination of forces

were driving the enormous increase in demand for higher education: the concentration of populations in large cities; the entrance of women into the labor market; the gradual expansion of basic and secondary education; the development of the youth culture; the movement of adults to acquire new qualifications, certifications, and job opportunities; the new skills required by modern industry and services; and the expansion of the welfare state and public services. As of 1990, the higher education enrollments had reached a gross rate of 40 percent in Argentina, 33 percent in Peru, 26 percent in Costa Rica, and 20 percent in Cuba. In these countries and in others like Mexico (with an enrollment rate of 14 percent), the public, national universities opened their doors to almost everybody who could apply, becoming among the largest higher education institutions in the world. In other places, like Brazil, Colombia, and Chile, the public and more traditional universities resisted the onslaught, trying to maintain their traditions and areas of competence. A new tier of higher education institutions developed, mostly as private endeavors, sometimes at the provincial and local levels. Their enrollment rates did not grow as much—11 percent in Brazil, 14.2 percent in Colombia, and 20.6 percent in Chile. These figures are also a reflection of the relative size of the urban centers and the new middle classes in each country. Mixed situations occur everywhere. Elite institutions have opened courses in more popular subjects for less-qualified students; open-admission universities created and maintained niches of competence and excellence; and a small, well-endowed group of private institutions emerged to cater to the children of the elites.

### **Institutional Change and Differentiation**

The need to accommodate an increasingly large number of students in a traditional university setting is just the most obvious aspect of a much deeper problem, which is how to adapt traditional institutions to a completely new set of social groups, functions, and demands. In spite of the cultural traditions coming from the Iberian peninsula, and the growing economic presence of Britain in Latin America since the years of independence, it is to France that Latin American politicians and intellectuals looked for the institutional models for their new states, including their institutions of higher learning. Many explanations could be given for this fact: Anglo-Saxon culture and traditions were more alien, and their language more remote. More to the point, perhaps, were the revolutionary rhetoric and France's effort to build a modern nation through the strength of the state, an appealing model when

civil society was so weak and the economy so poorly developed as in Latin America.

The new, public higher education institutions were to train the lawyers, engineers, military officers, and medical doctors to build the new nations, and the students in these institutions did not expect any less from their careers. General education was to be provided in the early period to the selected few, usually by the Church, and vocational and practical training for the masses was to occur on the job, if ever. Higher education was reserved for the new professions, and the new graduates were to become the intelligentsia of their societies. This explains the long tradition of student politics in Latin America, as well as the universities' usual disregard for scientific scholarship and technical expertise, with the usual and notable exceptions.

This arrangement is now being challenged from all sides. From the bottom, large numbers of applicants are hoping to get the same access to prestigious positions and income as the old elites, but willing to settle for recognized skills and a valid credential in the labor market. From the top, a new, small but vocal generation of foreign-trained academics and international advisers is calling for scientific research and advanced technical prowess, without which modernization and economic development will not materialize. And, from all sides, new ways of doing politics and gaining power are emerging, not respecting the status credentials of the old elite, and a competitive market in which traditional academic and family entitlements did not count as in the past.

The old universities had to change, and in fact have been doing so in recent decades, even if erratically most of the time. Countries that had kept their public universities protected allowed a new tier of higher education institutions to develop, copying as well as they could the established models, but offering evening classes, not requiring much in terms of performance, and charging students what they could pay. Countries that opted for open access to all students got used to enormous rates of student retention and dropouts in the first years, and all developed "graduate" programs to enhance the selection of their elites, and to answer the demands for research and scholarship.

### **Graduate Education and Research**

To preserve, and even to enhance, the old centers of quality and ex-

cellence was probably the easy part, although not without its problems. It is always easier, and much cheaper, to take care of a selected group of students and their teachers than to change large higher education systems as a whole, or to adapt them to an extended and highly differentiated set of new clients.

It is not by chance that what is "graduate" in the United States is called "postgraduate" in Latin America and Europe, and what is "graduate" in these regions is called "undergraduate" in the United States. Undergraduate, college education, as conceived in the United States and the United Kingdom, was always understood as part of secondary education on the European continent and in Latin America. "Postgraduate" education was never situated in specialized institutions, course programs, and "graduate schools," which are recognized as an American invention. Brazil is probably the one country in Latin America that went further in the introduction of American-style graduate programs in their universities, which were duly rechristened as "postgraduate," and placed in the country's best public institutions.

These programs perform at least three functions. The first is the stated one—to provide a place for education in advanced research and scholarship. There are several, good-quality programs of this kind, especially at some of the federal universities (in Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais) and mostly at the public universities supported by the São Paulo state (the Universities of São Paulo and Campinas). They employ most of the active researchers in Brazil, in all fields. The second is to provide credentials and continuing education to academic personnel in public universities. In Brazil, as in a number of other countries, new standards required credentials of academics that they did not possess. The countries could not provide enough personnel who met the new standards. The intentions were good, but the consequences were often problematic. In Brazil, graduate programs have mushroomed into the hundreds since the 1970s, most of them providing master's and "specialist" degrees that were accepted as second-best. Still, today only 16 percent of academic faculty in Brazil hold a doctoral degree—concentrated in a few places, such as the universities in the State of São Paulo—compared with 25 percent with M.A.s, 36 percent with some kind of specialist degree, and 22 percent with just an undergraduate diploma. The third function of the new graduate programs is to provide advanced skills and enhanced credentials for some students in an enlarged market. For the lawyers, economists, engineers, ad-

ministrators, medical doctors, and others who pursue higher degrees with that purpose in mind, the research requirements of the graduate programs are a nuisance, and they often drop out of the programs and forget about their academic commitments when their job situation improves. A final and very important reason to get into graduate education is to postpone entry into the labor market. In Brazil this phenomenon has helped by the existence of an extensive system of student fellowships for a significant portion of graduate students.

To control the quality of graduate education, the Brazilian Ministry of Education maintains an elaborate and well-reputed system of peer review evaluation of these programs. Data for the 1996/1997 period show the existence of 1,293 programs, half of them providing doctoral degrees. In an evaluation scale from one to seven, in which six means high quality, and seven corresponds to international quality standards, 83.1 percent received between three and five, 9.5 percent got six or seven, and 7.4 percent flunked with less than three points.

### **Undergraduate Education**

The combination of growing enrollments and the import of the U.S. model of graduate education transformed and downgraded large sections of the existing graduate higher education system in Latin America to a kind of undergraduate level. This was seldom done on purpose, although the 1968 university reform in Brazil did create something called "basic courses," which were to last for one or two years as a preparation for professional degrees and which failed almost everywhere. With the expanding youth culture, most 18-year-old students do not know how to choose a profession. Yet the notion that they should work on their general skills for some years after secondary school is very alien to the Latin American tradition, in spite of the absence of anything similar to European standards of good-quality, college-like secondary education.

In addition to general education, undergraduate programs need to provide vocational training, teacher education, and continuous, lifelong education. Eighteen-year-olds coming straight from acceptable secondary schools and aiming at long-term university degree programs are a minority within the larger student population comprised of older students, returning students, those that are in midcareer, and those who lack the necessary training to enter an academic-level program. In practice, a large portion of the new demand for higher education

was in the form of evening classes and four-year programs in fields such as administration, economics, accounting, and law, which seldom led to actual professional standing (only a small percentage of the students with law degrees in Brazil actually apply for and pass the bar examinations). Rather, these programs provide a credential their graduates can show when hunting for jobs, and at best some basic and general knowledge and skills that may be of practical value to graduates. A special case is the training of teachers in basic and secondary education—careers that are low-prestige and low-paying and usually embraced only in the absence of other opportunities.

Modern, mass higher education systems should be able to differentiate among these groups and their demands and provide each with the training necessary and compatible with their skills, aspirations, and needs. Very little of that is being done in Latin America, and it is probably unrealistic to expect such a vast undertaking from the central bureaucracies—which are still in place in most countries in the region—as they try to steer their higher education systems in some direction.

### **Finance**

The most that governments can do is to manage the limited resources they have, given the mounting costs of higher education, in a context of increasing competition over public funds and the stark need to balance public budgets. The growth of public expenditures in higher education, which took place almost everywhere, was not just a consequence of expanding enrollments. The old faculties had been staffed by lawyers, medical doctors, and engineers who earned most of their incomes from their work as professionals. The rising expenditures went to pay the salaries of the large numbers of full-time academic and non-academic employees staffing the new institutions. In public universities, these academic and nonacademic employees often receive the benefits of civil servants and are protected from firing, with assured promotion based on seniority and generous retirement benefits. These high costs, when combined with academic selectivity and inefficiencies in the allocation of resources, can lead to very high per capita expenditures. In 1990, Brazil spent about U.S.\$9,000 per year, per student in federal institutions; compared with about U.S.\$1,500 for Chile, Costa Rica, and Venezuela; around U.S.\$1,000 for Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Uruguay; and around U.S.\$500 or less for Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru. These figures are imprecise, since there is no clear definition of a "student,"

and the costs may include things like retirement benefits and teaching hospitals. The figures may in some cases reflect the laws and benefits relating to public employees rather than the quality of higher education provided by each country.

But public expenditure is just one part of the story. The estimation for 1998 was that Brazil would spend about U.S.\$14 billion a year on higher education, U.S.\$6 billion coming from the central government for the 350,000 students in federal universities, U.S.\$5 billion from state governments for the 250,000 students in state institutions, and about U.S.\$3 billion in tuition paid by the approximately 1.2 million students in private institutions. Brazil obviously needs to raise higher education enrollments to levels similar to those in other countries in the region and in the world, but it is unlikely that much higher levels of public support will be forthcoming. Other Latin American countries are also unlikely to increase their expenditures to anything similar to Brazil's per capita levels in the near future.

The possible alternatives are to use public resources more efficiently, bringing in more students without increasing funding; to expand the share of the private sector in the financing of higher education, charging tuition in public institutions (which is done in countries like Chile and some parts of Argentina, for instance, but is still taboo in Brazil); and to increase the cost of tuition everywhere. Tuition costs may reduce demand but may create social inequities, which have to be compensated by needs-based fellowships and student loans. The problems of financing higher education in Latin America are not only a matter of limited resources but, in large part, a question of how to better use what is already there.

### **Institutional Reform**

To make better use of money, and to provide the students with what they expect, deep institutional reforms are necessary. Most governments in the region have tried them, always encountering strong resistance, and with different degrees of success. There is a growing consensus on what has to be done. Public money for public universities has to be given according to clear criteria of performance and products delivered, not just according to historical trends or political influence. More broadly, a system of coordination based on the bureaucratic authority of the state needs to give way to one based more on competitive markets—not just markets of buyers and sellers of educational

products in the private sector, but of providers and users of good-quality academic and educational products. In the ideological disputes that surround higher education reform, this plea for more market-based, instead of bureaucratic regulation, is often derided as "privatization." However, the public sector can and probably will remain a key provider of funds for higher education; its way of acting will have to change, from bureaucratic management to the creation of mechanisms to promote competition in quality and performance among institutions.

The third corner of Burton Clark's well-known "coordination triangle," besides government and market, namely oligarchy, also has a role to play in the new context. The cosy arrangements, by which prestigious professors and academics used to make most of the decisions related to their work without explanation, cannot be maintained once systems get so complex and differentiated, with many conflicting goals and interests. Diffuse notions of prestige, competence, and quality have to be replaced, or at least complemented by more precise information stemming from well-conceived tests, performance measures, and statistical analysis. Still, academic and professional authority will always be needed. Evaluation and accreditation committees are being established everywhere, creating rankings, allocating resources, and evaluating new and existing programs. Prestigious scholars and professors are the only ones with the legitimacy to establish the rules of the new "academic markets," and to act as counterweights to the bureaucratic and centralizing tendencies of governments.

Reforms at the coordination level have to be followed by changes at the institutional level. The decisions to be made by university administrators in this new context of intense competition, complex tasks, and scarce resources are very different and much more difficult than those of the past, when the only things to be decided were who should teach what in each semester, and who would participate in the various academic commissions. Most public higher education institutions in Latin America, however, still function as in the old days, with decisions taken after lengthy faculty meetings, and without help from professional administrators and staff. The new context requires more power and authority for the central administration, external supervision, and a better system of making difficult decisions on personnel, academic programs, and enrollment policies. There is still a long way to go in this direction, especially in

public institutions, given the need to change rules related to the civil service, and also to alter the relative power of different groups within the institutions.

### **The New Challenges**

The issues outlined above—regarding mass higher education, undergraduate and graduate education, financing and institutional reform—have been on the higher education agenda in Latin America for many years, and are far from being resolved in most places. The main reason for this slow pace is the high political costs of reform. Students, academics, and administrators do not know much about the complexities of change in higher education, and often have good reason to mistrust their governments. Moreover, they feel they might be directly affected by reforms leading to closer evaluation of what a lecturer does in class, or whether a student is really learning, or whether money is being spent wisely. Many sectors in society would favor these reforms: employers hoping for more-qualified employees, families looking for good schools for their children, less-privileged persons looking for more suitable learning opportunities, governments needing to cut spending or to make better use of their resources. But these potential supporters of change are scattered, while the stakeholders within higher education institutions are well organized, able to demonstrate against the government, and have easy access to the press. No wonder that some of the biggest transformations in higher education in Latin America were accomplished by authoritarian regimes. However, to thrive, higher education institutions require personal involvement and legitimacy, which are characteristics of free and democratic societies. In Chile and Brazil, democratic regimes tried to build on what military governments had left in terms of effective institutional improvements, while getting rid of the authoritarian components of the previous years.

While reform is likely to be slow and erratic, there are new challenges that can increase the pace of change. The most important is probably the fact that Latin American universities are gradually losing their monopoly on granting diplomas and professional credentials. Until recently, Uruguay had just one university, and the idea that private institutions could compete with it was inconceivable. Today, other institutions are emerging, and the Universidad de la República is feeling the pressure of competition. In Argentina and Mexico, provincial universities were slow to appear, and were always looked upon with mistrust by the large national universities in Buenos Aires and Mexico City. Even in Brazil,

with a large private sector and strong Catholic universities, the private sector is still widely mistrusted, and the government holds the right to decide who can and cannot teach, what is to be taught (albeit in very general terms), and whether specific academic programs meet the standards defined by the ministerial authorities. This supervisory power is justified by the need to control the quality of teaching and protect the students and the public—but with the side effect of restricting competition in the more regulated sectors of the job market and of stifling creativity and innovation.

What remains of this monopolistic or quasimonopolistic power seems to be eroding very rapidly. The job market is reducing its reliance on educational credentials, and requiring more competence and skills, which can be provided not only by formal educational institutions and formal programs, but also by a host of new entrepreneurs, who are discovering the new possibilities of the "education industry." Educational institutions in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries are starting to establish alliances, partnerships, and franchises in different parts of the world, including Latin America. Distance learning is still in its infancy but has the potential to wreak havoc with national and regional barriers. The international mobility of students, which until recently had been limited to graduate students, is providing an alternative to the increasing costs of domestic private education for undergraduates in higher income brackets.

In this scenario, institutions that depend upon a steady flow of public money, uncomplaining students, and a monopolistic hold on the education market are bound to disappear or deteriorate, losing their best professional staff and academic faculty. Latin American higher education institutions are finally becoming aware of this new situation and starting to adjust to it, rather than merely waiting for broader systemwide changes. Because of this, there are good reasons for hope.

#### Note

1. For an overview of Latin American higher education and its policy agenda, see José Joaquin Brunner, coordinator, and Jorge Balán, et al., *Educación superior en América Latina: Una agenda para el año 2000*, Proyecto de políticas comparadas de educación superior (Bogotá, Universidad nacional de Colombia, 1995); see also the special issue of *Higher Education*, 25, 1, 1993, on Latin America, ed. José Joaquin

Brunner and Simon Schwartzman; and Simon Schwartzman, América Latina: Universidades en transición (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1996).